Sections
Focus
Columns and Reviews
Consulting
Training
News & Announcements

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Submissions
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The School of Business and Writer's Place Partnership at The College of New Jersey

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by Diane Gruenberg and Nancy Lasher

The authors take an interdisciplinary approach to developing a business school guide to writing.

Like many institutions, The College of New Jersey, a public college with an undergraduate student population of about 6000, is grappling with the role and quality of undergraduate writing. Moreover, we are doing so in the context of a recent curricular revision through which all courses were transformed from 3-credits to 4-credits and departments in the liberal arts and professional schools have begun to develop writing intensive courses. One goal driving this curricular revision was to have students dive more deeply into the subjects they study by writing more and better. Through this curricular change, we wrestled with questions such as "how will changes in the curriculum affect what kind and how much writing students do?" and "what effect will curricular transformation have on the balance between content and writing?" A key concern for many faculty centered on not being sure how to teach writing and to respond to student papers. As our community focused attention on these matters, we discovered unexpected and fruitful opportunities for collaboration across program and disciplinary lines. One such collaboration between **The School of Business** and **The Write Place** began last year in response to faculty concerns about the quality of student papers.

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The Writer's Place is not actually a place but rather a way of thinking about the writing assistance provided in our multi-subject tutoring center originally created in the 1970's as a remedial reading, writing, and mathematics lab. As our college has attracted better-prepared students and the need for basic skills support declined, professors and students expected more flexible, short term writing assistance. In 2001, the Center piloted twenty five-minute and fifty-minute single-session Writing Conferences (WC) to supplement long-established weekly appointment assistance. Some professors require students to attend WC sessions, others recommend WC use, still others simply announce WC availability and leave the decision completely to students. Users range from honors program students to students on academic probation, and most students attend sessions voluntarily, not as a course requirement. Usage has grown from 151 sessions in 2001-2002 to 330 sessions in 2004-05. Through mid-March of the current academic year, 450 WC sessions have met.

Through Diane's eyes, a story that sets the context for collaboration: When Joe (not his real name) was leaving The Writer's Place after his first writing

conference as a new student to our college, we fell into step and had the following conversation.

> Diane: Thanks for coming in for a conference. I hope it was useful.
>
> Joe: Oh, yeah, it helped me. But really, I don't like writing at all.
>
> Diane: Ah, many of us don't like the actual writing as much as we like finishing, especially when we feel good about the piece.
>
> Joe: Well, maybe, but writing isn't that important to me. I mean, I'm a business major.

Walking and talking with Joe as he was leaving the center didn't seem like the time or place to explore the place of writing in professional and liberal arts courses or the possible roles of writing in business: a way to grapple with the intersection of theory and practice, a vehicle for workplace electronic communication, and the medium for business proposals and plans. However, the conversation started Diane thinking about differences between disciplines in which writing is assumed to occupy a central place in the curriculum and disciplines in which writing students think writing is something apart from the important work of learning the course content. Although business students expect to "crunch numbers" throughout their careers, in reality business people spend much of their time writing memos and reports. Add to that the widespread use of email, and it becomes increasingly clear that business requires more writing of its employees than ever before.

Moreover, students are not the only ones to relegate writing to the periphery of teaching and learning in courses outside of the traditional writing disciplines such as English and history. At our college, at any rate, it is not unusual for faculty in professional degree programs to assume that teaching of writing is the domain of liberal arts professors. During School of Business faculty meetings, a frequent topic of discussion is the quality of student writing, as suggested by the following of snatches of conversation.

Through Nancy's eyes, a composite story that describes various problems that prompted collaboration:

> Prof. Management: Student writing isn't good at all. They've been taught to write in liberal arts style–too wordy and flowery, not concise enough or appropriate for business writing.
>
> Nancy: With the College's emphasis on writing intensive courses, we need to require that our students take writing classes in business-related subjects. If we tell them to take WI classes as part of their liberal arts requirement, we're sending the wrong message about the importance of good writing in the business world.
>
> Prof. Marketing: I agree that the business world needs format and writing style that's different from what's taught in the liberal arts, and I can recognize what is acceptable for business writing, but I don't know how to teach it.
>
> Prof. Finance: And grading! Students come in all the time to argue about their paper grades. Working out grades is so much clearer with multiple choice questions, but in the work world they won't

get multiple choice tests.

Here, then, is a central dilemma facing faculty in professional degree programs. *While an obvious way to tackle problems of teaching appropriate writing skills to undergraduate students studying toward professional degrees is to incorporate writing instruction into the professional course requirements, professors often say, "I am not trained to teach writing."*

To begin addressing this dilemma, Nancy brought together a group of colleagues who became the Ad Hoc School of Business Writing Committee. Even though they were from disparate disciplines, they shared similar concerns about student writing. Coincidentally, all had collaborated with The Writer's Place Director, whose work includes supporting student and faculty writing activities, and the College's Business Reference Librarian, who meets with their classes to discuss resources available for assigned research projects. Thus, both The Writer's Place Director and the Business Librarian became logical additions to the Ad Hoc Committee.

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During early discussions, the Committee discovered that while some classes in the School of Business required little writing, most assigned research papers, essay exams, business memos, and diverse forms of analytic writing. But even if business faculty required different writing formats, all expected to read papers that are well organized, thoughtfully argued, and relatively free of surface errors. Committee members agreed that certain elements are common to all good writing–clarity, punctuation, grammar, spelling, and organization. Also, in today's electronic world, "cut and paste" plagiarism has become a major problem, one that needed an appropriate forum to help students understand why and how to avoid plagiarism.

Eventually, the Ad Hoc Committee concluded that students would benefit from having a School of Business Guide to Writing that would provide incoming students with a rationale for developing effective writing habits and skills and suggestions about how they can work on their writing in the context of their business courses. The Committee agreed the following topics should be included in the Guide: business writing format, types of writing used in business (analysis, evaluation, and synthesis), grammar and correctness, academic honesty and ways to avoid plagiarism, campus resources, and sample grading rubrics. Each committee member volunteered to draft a section.

Over multiple lunch meetings, Committee members engaged in the processes they recommended students use: brainstorming ideas together, providing each other collegial comments, smoothing out the various voices, and doing a final editing/proofreading. Finally, doing several writing conferences with each other, Diane and Nancy revised the parts, weaving them into a coherent and useful whole.

When fall 2005 classes began, printed copies of **The School of Business Guide to Writing** were distributed to all incoming business students and made available on the web. At the time of writing this article, we have had only informal feedback from colleagues and students, and no doubt a second edition will need to respond to questions and suggestions that emerge from the first year of using the Guide. But the work of those involved in the discussions,

planning, and writing of this handbook has placed writing in a more prominent position in the School of Business. Furthermore, this work has become a ground-breaking model for other schools and departments in our community to push through disagreements about writing to find common ground. And perhaps most importantly, in completing the Guide, we have begun the conversations anew.

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